



URBAN SCRAWL

Christopher Wool declares himself in a bold new retrospective at the Guggenheim.

BY DAVID SALLE

IT'S A MISTAKE TO ASK A WORK OF ART TO BE ALL things to all people; the question is, How little can we ask of art and still find that it expands to fulfill our aesthetic longings? By which I mean that state of aware receptivity that acts like a gravitational field, pulling other things into itself and releasing an unaccounted-for piece of one's heart into the light.

Christopher Wool's paintings put me in mind of rock 'n' roll songs and how they recycle the same slender means: three, maybe four chords, a plaintive lyric repeated over and over in strict 4/4 time. It's not much compared with Hindemith, but an electric guitar in the right hands can be so riveting that it's the only sound you want to hear. This is one of the effects of the work in Wool's retrospective, at New York's Guggenheim until January 22.

For much of the 1980s, Wool made words the entire visual event of his work—how they sound as well as how they look. At the time this did not seem to me a very auspicious beginning, largely because words have a long, long history in modern art. From Picasso and Braque, of course, to Picabia, Delaunay, even Gerald Murphy, to the whole of Russian Constructivism, to Stuart Davis and the Precisionists, onward to Rauschenberg and that great stenciler Jasper Johns, followed closely by Warhol and Ruscha (both former graphic artists), to the more philosophical Lawrence Weiner, John Baldessari, and Bruce Nauman, to Jean-Michel Basquiat, every generation since 1910 has had its exemplars. But a good artist is often something of a gambler, and against these steep odds Wool, blithely doubling down Lucky



BLURRED LINES
From left: Christopher Wool, at the Gagolian Gallery in Beverly Hills, in front of *Untitled* (2005); *Untitled* (2001).

Pierre-style, excluded everything from his paintings but the words.

Wool aligns the act of looking with reading; to look is to read, and back again. But that's not quite it. The experience of a Wool painting starts with reading, but it's more like being read to. As one looks at it, a voice other than one's own intrudes. To look is to be shouted at, to be harangued—the paintings come with their own megaphone. (A *New Yorker* cartoon would have a small man standing in front of a Wool painting meekly pointing to himself with the caption, "Who, me?") Their tone is declarative, often accusatory—punk rock lyrics for radical works of theater. Their closest stylistic relative is Peter Handke's ravishing indictment of bourgeois mendacity, *Offending the Audience*.

Black stenciled letters on white grounds, the paintings are handsome and, with so few elements, elegantly resolved. Wool's painted words refer as well to the fraternal commingling (and at times the struggle) between painting and printing. Take *Apocalypse Now* (1988) or *Trouble* (1990): Though cool and dry, there is a rewarding physicality to these pictures, a painterly quality that derives in part from a feeling for scale and proportion. Wool makes lovely shaped rectangles. You might think this to be so elementary as to not warrant notice, but try it—it's harder than it looks. This is, at first glance, the kind of art that in the past might have elicited the old philistine sneer, "My kid could do that." Indeed, your kid could make reasonable facsimiles of Wool's word paintings if Junior

were allowed to swear like a sailor (“FUCKEM IFTHEY CANTTA KEAJOK E,” said one).

In contemporary art no one ever went broke using stringently reduced means. There are many reasons for the lasting appeal of this negation, all stemming from the art world’s utopian vision. It’s partly the legacy of Bauhaus—banish ornament and you do away with sentimentality—plus the desire for art to mimic the workings of a machine, both as optimistic embrace and as bitter critique. There runs through the avant-garde a kind of childish refusal: No, I *won’t* use color. I *won’t* make beautiful things. I *won’t* entertain. But an artist sometimes has to make a sharp turn in order to go straight ahead. I’m reminded of a story about the young Frank Stella, who initially wanted to paint like Velázquez but since that was not really possible, painted black stripes instead. The black stripes were his Velázquez. About six years ago the Courbet retrospective was on at the Met: paintings of stunning breadth and heft, all sinewy, lean, oxygenated muscle, paintings like the tremendous nights with one’s first real love. Ahhh... This is painting! In one of the last rooms hung three magnificent, enormous paintings of hunted stags. And whom should I see as I rounded the corner? Wool, naturally, also communing with the dying stag. The last art-

ist I would have expected to allow himself to be moved by such high melodrama.

Around 2000, Wool entered a phase of such expansiveness and expressiveness that it was hard to find the continuity with his earlier work; he no longer engaged with words as such, but with the language of abstract painting. He started making paintings with the feel of High Modernism once removed. From one show to the next, this sandwich board writer started his version of *The Waste Land*.

Two important elements entered his painting vocabulary: freehand lines made with a spray gun, and Benday dots, the things that make halftones reproducible on a printed page. The dot pattern—so graphically seductive! It is to painting what anchovy reduction is to cooking, a mysterious ingredient that deepens the relationship between all the elements and makes everything look (or taste) better.

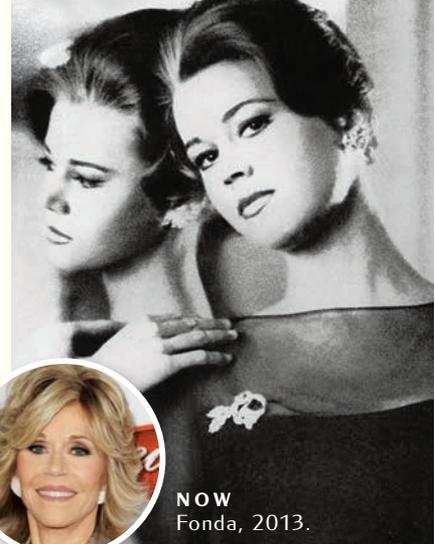
In the past few years the space in Wool’s paintings has gotten lighter and airier. Some of the paintings of the last decade have De Kooning’s late figures in the landscape as their understructure (one even has a De Kooning–esque title, *Woman on a Bicycle*), but in Wool, who is a determinedly urban painter; the exuberant, watery colorations come out as variations on gray, white, and black. And not the elegant grays of Jasper Johns but the way Chinatown looks in the rain: the thin, chalky grays of faded signs or yesterday’s newspaper blowing in the gutter; the look of a car windshield wiped by a dirty squeegee.

A recent Wool painting arrives at its fullness through an accumulation of removals, additions, erasures, spray-painted lines, gestural swipes and wipes, overprintings, and other procedures. It’s difficult to tell what is the first layer and what is the last, what is painted and what is printed. Wool’s pictures have a pleasantly confusing, smooched-up feeling. They are structured but vaporous, ironic but sincere in a way that is circular, declarative, and open-ended all at once. The good pictures are nearly perfect examples of what abstract painting can be today. They have verve and gravitas—they

anchor the wall with the conviction of classical abstract art, and their rhythms, their weights and balances—a meandering line on top of a purposeful back-and-forth full-arm scrub—are highly energized and fully first-rate. He has the great gift of knowing when to stop. ●

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

THEN
Jane Fonda in
T&C, 1961.



NOW
Fonda, 2013.

Mondo Fonda

In August 1961 a 23-year-old Jane Fonda modeled an elegant black dress and diamond brooch ensemble for a *Town & Country* feature called “Lively and New on the West Coast.” The U.S. military, whose “Special Advisors” had begun counseling the Vietnamese people that May, had named her Miss Army Recruiter in 1959, the first of many strategic blunders.

Fonda’s journey from Strasberg protégée to intergalactic sex symbol to shaggy-haired radical to workout video queen has filled a shelf of biographies. But for unrivaled access and intimate detail, her 20,000-page FBI file remains the comprehensive account.

Earlier this year the two-time Oscar-winning actress appeared in *The Butler*, tackling what might be the most challenging role of her career: Nancy Reagan. The *Denver Post* found her “disarmingly appealing,” while the *Hollywood Reporter* rated the performance “very good indeed.” Can a Phyllis Schlafly biopic be far behind? **ASH CARTER**

SELL THE HOUSE SELL THE CAR SELL THEK

GRAPHIC CONTENT

Two Christopher Wool paintings, *Apocalypse Now* (1988, above) and *Untitled* (2010) at the Guggenheim.

